Fairbury's Old Building Advertising Signs Popular with Visitors and Residents

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For: Fairbury Blade newspaper
Date: February 10, 2020

Back in 2015, Aldermen Terry Zimmerman and David Slagel formed the Fairbury Improvement Group. The mission of this group was to improve the quality of life for current residents, maintain the population, and attract more visitors to shop, dine, and enjoy Fairbury's recreational activities.

One of the improvement ideas generated by the group was to save Fairbury's ghost advertising signs painted on the sides of three buildings. The most massive ghost sign was the Occident Flour sign located at the northeast corner of Second and Locust Streets. Most of the old letters were still visible, with two exceptions. Several of the small letters on the bottom of the sign were missing. It was found that a modified Aerial font could be used to create patterns for new letters.

The letter "I" was completely missing in the word Occident. The Occident Flour company had their signs painted on many buildings in the Midwest. They used a very unique font with "bumps" at strategic points on the letters. An internet search found the same sign painted on a building in Minnesota. The image of the Minnesota letter "I" was scaled to match the height of the Fairbury sign. A template was made from thin plywood. The template was placed against the brick wall. A pencil was then used to trace the outline of the letter. Once the letter was penciled onto the brick wall, blue masking tape was used to outline the borders of the letter. Three coats of high-quality latex house paint were applied to paint all the sign letters.

One of the challenges of saving the Occident Flour ghost sign was how to get access to repaint the letters. There were electrical wires about six feet away from the building. Accessing all the letters required a stepladder, an extension ladder, scaffolding, and a man-lift. This sign was finished in August of 2016.

The second ghost sign saved was the Swing & Steidinger sign. Historical research found this sign was initially painted in 1891. The Swing & Steidinger partnership only lasted about two years. After the partnership ended, Joseph Swing opened his own hardware store about a block east of the Swing & Steidinger building. He and his family moved to LaPorte, Indiana, in 1914.

Because of the large number of people with the name Steidinger in the Fairbury area, it was very challenging to determine which Steidinger was in the partnership with Mr. Swing. With the assistance of some of the Steidinger family members, it was discovered that Alexander Steidinger was the man in business with Mr. Swing. After their partnership dissolved, Alexander spent the rest of his life farming in Fairbury.

The Swing & Steidinger sign lists many of the products the business sold back in 1891. Unfortunately, the three products on the west side of the sign were not legible. When Gordon Kinate purchased this building back in 1982, he placed a plea in the Blade newspaper to see if anyone knew what the missing words were. Former Fairbury Mayor Roy Taylor responded to Kinate's appeal. Roy said that when we got rain from the North, the letters became visible. Within a few weeks, Fairbury received a rain from the North. Gordon Kinate immediately climbed up to the second story of a building across the street from the Swing & Steidinger sign. Gordon recorded all the words on the sign, including the missing letters. The missing words turned out to be roofing, grouting, and repairing. Gordon's records were used to recreate the missing letters.

Access to repainting the Swing & Steidinger sign was also an issue. There were some electrical wires in the way of using a man-lift to paint the letters. The City of Fairbury crew temporarily relocated the cables so the old sign could be saved. The repainting of this sign was completed in May of 2017.

The last ghost sign saved was the Archer House. George Archer built the Archer House back in 1882. Sometime around 1892, the building name was changed to the Sherman Hotel.

Unfortunately, no old photographs of the Archer House are known to be in existence. The word "house" was still partially legible. This word gave a clue that the original font was Clarendon. This font was invented in 1845, so it was age-appropriate for the Archer House sign painted in 1882.

Historical research found that in 1886, an average of 14 people per day stayed at the Archer House. The cost was $2.00 per day or about $55 per day in today's dollars.

Since the old hotel had two different names, a decision had to be made concerning which name to repaint. The decision was made to repaint the original 1882 Archer House sign. A computer drafting program was used to create the new 29 inch tall letters in Clarendon font. Thin plywood templates of each letter were made. The letters were painted using these templates.

The man-lift was set up on the street to start painting the new letters. Unfortunately, the man-lift would not extend far enough to reach the wall of the building. This inability of the lift to extend to the building was initially a baffling problem. The previous summer, the same man-lift had been successfully used to repaint the Swing & Steidinger sign. A tape measure revealed the answer to the mystery of why the man-lift did not have enough reach. The sidewalks on the north side of Locust Street were about nine feet wider than the sidewalks on the south side of the street. Once the man-lift was placed up onto the sidewalk closer to the building, the letters could be painted.

Another issue encountered was very high winds on the first day of painting. These high winds kept pushing the man-lift bucket away from the building. Sign painting was

suspended that day due to the high winds. Work was resumed the next day when the winds had died down. This Archer House sign project was completed in May of 2018.

The material costs for these three projects were covered by either the building owner or the Prairie Lands Foundation. Volunteers donated all the labor for preparing the letter templates and doing the actual sign painting.

The repainted old building advertising signs are very popular with current Fairbury residents. Visitors also enjoy seeing the century-old advertisements. They help to preserve the rich history of some of Fairbury's old businesses.

SWI NG & STE IDIN GER
AG RICU LTURAL ROD MS
PUMPS AND TANKS
WAGONS AND HARNESS
CARRIAGES CARTS BUGGIES
ROOFING GROUTING & REPAIRING
BICYCLES & TRICYCLES
LAW
O FICES

ARCHER HOUSE
FURNITURE